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ABSTRACT

This document augments an earlier issue of the NAEA Advisory that reported on studies done by researcher Wanda May on understanding and critical thinking in art and music at the elementary level. The topics of May's research in that earlier publication encompassed: (1) differences between creative and critical thinking; (2) higher order processes; (3) discipline boundaries; (4) current criticisms; (5) what is the content of art and music; and (6) developmental stages. There are, however, additional areas of May's research that were not reported, and these concerned curriculum trends in and major theoretical orientations toward art. May identified four major currents of curriculum thought that dominate themes in public education: (1) focus on subject matter (disciplinary knowledge); (2) focus on learners; (3) focus on social efficiency; and (4) focus on social reconstruction. Based on an informed awareness of these general curriculum interests, May concluded that the goals and practices in art and music can be better understood. Educational goals develop from the expectations of society. May identified four families of aesthetic theory as orientations toward art: (1) mimetic; (2) pragmatic; (3) expressive; and (4) objective. May cross-referenced the primary relationships of the four families of theoretical orientation to the four major curriculum interests. May's findings suggest that children can perceive qualities of art and musical forms before they are able to produce such qualities in their own compositions. Most children enjoy music and art appreciation activities as well as creating art and music. This document suggests that May's correlation of education philosophy and aesthetic orientation is of particular value, as is the use of significant research to help guide art teachers toward greater emphasis on aesthetic perception and inquiry, historical awareness, and cultural concepts. (DK)

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by

Kimm Stastny

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NAEA Advisory

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What is Higher Order Thinking in Art and Music? (Another View)

by

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The National Art Education Association published the *NAEA Advisory*, in the Spring of 1989 entitled, "What is Higher Order Thinking in Art and Music?" The *NAEA Advisory* was taken from an article by Sandra Gross in the *IRT Communication Quarterly* (Fall, 1988), which was a review of a research paper by Wanda May, *Understanding and Critical Thinking in Elementary Art and Music* (Elementary Subjects Series No. 8). May's paper was one of seven review/synthesis papers prepared to help frame the research program of the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Elementary Subjects, Institute for Research on Teaching (IRT), Michigan State University in East Lansing. Wanda May is a senior researcher with the Center. Sandra Gross is editor of IRT publications.

The topics reported by Gross of May's research, as published in the *NAEA Advisory*, encompassed the following areas: (1) Differences Between Creative and Critical Thinking; (2) Higher Order Processes; (3) Discipline Boundaries; (4) Current Criticisms; (5) What is the Content of Art and Music?; and (6) Developmental Stages.

The *NAEA Advisory* (Spring, 1989) created the impression that May's research focused on questions of art and music knowledge and learning, the nature of creative and critical thinking and students' abilities at particular ages. While these topics are addressed, there are additional areas of May's research which were not reported. I believe these areas would be of interest to readers of NAEA publications, especially the *NAEA Advisory* series. In particular, May analyzed the relationships among general curriculum interests, curriculum trends in art and music and major theoretical orientations toward art. She also reported her findings in the summary of the paper.

General Curriculum Interests

As May stated in her introduction, "There are many assumptions to unravel about understanding and critical thinking in the arts; therefore, we must explore how assumptions are developed, maintained or changed by reexamining the goals of education and the purposes of arts education in particular" (1989, p. 3). May identified four major currents of curriculum thought that dominate themes in public education. They are briefly described as follows:

- **Focus on subject matter (disciplinary knowledge).** The interest in, and maintenance of, existing school subjects which have proven resilient over time.

- **Focus on learners.** The interest in the learner's interests and abilities, which translates into curriculum flexibility.

- **Focus on social efficiency.** The interest in skill-oriented academic study that can be readily applied to the "real world" of adult work and roles.

- **Focus on social reconstruction.** The interest in social purposes and personal responsibility for a better quality of life, resulting in problem-centered curriculum built on social issues and questions.

Curriculum Trends

Based on an informed awareness of these general curriculum interests, May concluded that the goals and practices in art and music can be better understood. In other words, educational goals develop from the expectations of society. Following a historical analysis of purposes and practices in arts education, May summarized, "We can see that the goals in art and music education have not changed much over time in terms of their major, abiding themes. Today, there is less emphasis on the social efficiency perspective and creativity. Visual arts education hardly mentions creativity as a primary goal. There is little attention to the social meliorist perspective in the ideology of recently formulated curriculum policies and documents. And, there is increased attention to art and music as disciplines, or legitimate and distinctive forms of knowing and subjects of serious study" (1989, p. 43).

Major Theoretical Orientations Toward Art

Based on the work of Efland, May (1989) identified four families of aesthetic theory as orientations toward art.

• **The Mimetic Orientation**, wherein, "The value of a work is determined by the degree to which it provides a faithful representation of nature" (p. 45).

• **The Pragmatic Orientation**, wherein, "The value of a work is determined by the degree to which it pleases and/or morally instructs the audience (18th century) or stresses how the arts are a vehicle for social interaction and communication" (p. 47).

• **The Expressive Orientation**, wherein, "The value of art is determined by the degree to which it reflects the creative process and the individual's freedom to engage in such a process" (p. 49).

• **The Objective Orientation**, wherein, "The value of art is determined by the degree to which the art object incorporates various attributes in a formal organization that has organic unity and integrity" (p. 51).

In sum, May cross-referenced the following primary relationships of the four families of theoretical orientation to the four major curriculum interests: "Mimetic, aesthetic theories and tenets are most closely related to curricular interests in social efficiency and skill development. Pragmatic theories are aligned with either social efficiency or social meliorism, depending upon the social purpose of particular activities or learning and the nature of students' participation. Pragmatic theories are learner-centered only when they emphasize individuals' interactions with the social setting and personal integration developed from social encounters, problem solving and communicative endeavors through the arts. Expressive theories relate most clearly to interests in learners and their natural development, creativity and feelings. Objective theories most closely align with a curricular interest in subject matter" (1989, p. 55).

According to May there is an uneasy tension between theory and practice, especially regarding the goals of aesthetics and art criticism in the elementary grades. She concluded, "Allocation of time to the arts, lengthy gaps between lessons, teacher preparation and education, and public opinion about the value of arts learning are the most persistent obstacles to reform that emphasizes the development of students' conceptual understanding and critical thinking in the arts." (1989, p. 58).

Major Findings

Among the findings reported by May, the following four are significant for art educators:

• "There is increasing empirical evidence to suggest that youngsters are capable of perceiving and attending to qualities of art and musical forms before they are able to produce such qualities in their own art or musical compositions" (p. 105).

• "There is evidence from several research perspectives that most children generally enjoy engaging in art and music, whether making or responding to images and sounds, and that the number and quality of these encounters can have a significant impact on students' depth of understanding and appreciation of art and music as ways of knowing, and their lifelong learning and participation in the arts" (p. 106).

• "Recent research focused on teachers' pedagogical and subject-matter knowledge suggests teachers need an in-depth understanding and love of the subjects they teach and the disposition and skill to explore their students' understanding of subject matter systematically. Classroom dialogue is socratic, negotiated, and exploratory in character; fewer topics are 'covered', and these are explored in depth; and, students are encouraged to attend to their own thinking and the ways in which they think about concepts, perceive relationships among concepts, or how they solve intellectual and technical problems through reflective exploration and application (metacognition)" (p. 107).

• "We know from research that the primary emphasis in elementary art and music instruction *is* on performance and production, with little attention to other significant ways in which students might engage in arts learning. If creative and critical problem-solving, generating and testing hypotheses, metacognition, thoughtful reflection, and critique are important dimensions of arts learning, it will be difficult for students to engage in such learning when *all* art and musical outcomes in the enacted curriculum (that which is actually taught) are defined narrowly as imitation and production, and all products or songs are created by, derived from and selected by adults" (p. 107).

Conclusion

My initial reaction to the *NAEA Advisory* in question was positive. It was strong enough to cause me to secure a copy of Wanda May's paper. Following a review of the research it became readily apparent that dimensions of her work not addressed in Sandra Gross's article would be of general interest and value to art educators. As such this *Advisory* calls attention to several aspects of her research that are relevant to the current debate about the purposes and design of art education experiences and programs. Of particular value is the correlation of educational philosophy and aesthetic orientation, and the use of significant research to help guide the actions of art educators toward greater emphasis on aesthetic perception and inquiry, historical awareness and cultural concepts.

References

May,W. (1988). *Understanding and Critical Thinking in Elementary Art and Music* (Elementary Subjects Series No. 8). East Lansing, MI: Institute for Research on Teaching at Michigan State University.

Gross, S. (1989, Spring). *What is higher order thinking in art and music?* Reprinted from the IRT Communication Quarterly in the *NAEA Advisory* (Spring 1989).